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ABSTRACT

Based on a modification of Berglas and Jones' (1978) design, conditions of contingent and noncontingent success and failure were manipulated to determine when and why individuals choose to adopt self-handicapping strategies. Male undergraduates (N=76) were informed that they were participating in a study investigating the effects of music on intellectual and creative tests. Contingency was determined by informing subjects accurately about their performance on 32 moderately difficult analogies while noncontingency was determined by informing subjects randomly about their performance on 24 of the 32 analogies. Feedback was manipulated by informing subjects they scored in the 95th percentile (success) or in the 25th percentile (failure). The major dependent variable was the selection of either performance-facilitating or inhibiting music to be listened to prior to an alleged retest. The selection of the inhibiting music was considered to be the manifestation of self-handicapping. Measures of control, attributions and expectations were used as ancillary dependent measures while the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List and the Multidimensional Internal-External Scale were used as premeasures. It was found that the best predictor of self-handicapping was reported feelings of depression, regardless of the experimental manipulations. Self-handicappers appeared to maintain an illusory sense of control on the experimental task, while paradoxically downplaying the overall importance of control in their lives. (Author)

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SOME PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF SELF-HANDICAPPING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Based on a modification of Berglas and Jones' (1978) design, conditions of contingent and noncontingent success and failure were manipulated to determine situations in which and reasons why individuals choose to adopt self-handicapping strategies. Seventy six male undergraduates were informed that they were participating in a study which was investigating the effects of music on intellectual and creative tests. Contingency was determined by informing subjects accurately about their performance on 32 moderately difficult analogies while noncontingency was determined by informing subjects randomly about their performance on 24 of the 32 analogies. Feedback was manipulated by informing subjects they scored in the 95th percentile (success) or in the 25th percentile (failure). The major dependent variable was the selection of either performance-facilitating or inhibiting music to be listened to prior to an alleged retest. The selection of the inhibiting music was considered to be the manifestation of self-handicapping. Measures of control, attributions and expectations were used as ancillary dependent measures while the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965) and the Multidimensional IE scale (Gurin, Gurin, Lao & Beattie, 1969) were used as premeasures. It was found that the best predictor of self-handicapping was reported feelings of depression, regardless of the experimental manipulations. Self-handicappers appeared to maintain an illusory sense of control on the experimental task, while paradoxically, downplaying the overall inportance of cont-ol in their lives. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This study was based on a social psychological experiment designed to examine conditions under which individuals choose to adopt self-handicapping behaviors. The term, "self-handicapping", refers to any action or performance setting that enhances the opportunity to excuse failure while accepting credit for success. Self-handicapping people are individuals who set themselves up for failure and sabotage their chances for positive outcomes, satisfaction or success. Examples of self-handicapping behaviors are shyness, procrastination, hypochondriasis, and overextending.

Elements of self-handicapping may be observed in many individuals. People that are shy often refrain from placing themselves in situations where they may be singled out, usually at the cost of desired social interactions. Similarly, people who procrastinate and delay doing things until near the time of its deadline often hide behind the potential excuse that they did not have enough time to complete the task. In addition, hypochondrical individuals adopt the sick role and use their symptons as alibis for escaping responsibilities, while people who overextend themselves take on too much and often hide behind a mask of a busy schedule.

Archetypal examples of the self-handicapping person are the characters Woody Allen has portrayed in many of his films. He often is seen as a bumbler who goes out of his way to set himself up for failure. He is his own worst enemy, a characteristic typical of many people who manifest self-handicapping behaviors, as well as of people who manifest depression.

Another characteristic of self-handicapping behavior is that it allows people to defend themselves against anxiety. In other words, this behavior makes people feel better as they anticipate a future task, and thus serves

a self-protective function. These behaviors also permit people to escape or avoid certain responsibilities, especially those associated with an anticipated failure. They also give people a sense of control which may or may not be real.

Berglas and Jones (1978), who originally coined the term "self-handicapping strategies" argued that the adoption of such behaviors enabled people to maintain a precarious illusion of control. Yet in their study they failed to obtain any indices of control.

The present study sought to obtain indices of control because it is hypothesized that self-handicapping people suffer from an exaggerated illusion of control. An illusion of control refers to an individual's overestimation of the degree of control in a particular situation relative to the subjective judgments made by others in a similar situation. This definition differs slightly from Langer's (1975) and Alloy and Abramson's (1979; 1982) use of the term since actual degree of control was not considered.

The current study, based on a modification of the Berglas and Jones' study, attempted to determine whether self-handicappers suffer from an exaggerated illusion of control and to discover other characteristics of people who self-handicap. Contingency and noncontingency were manipulated with success and failure feedback in a 2x2 factorial design.

Contingency refers to a correspondence between one's responses and outcomes, while noncontigency refers to a lack of correspondence between one's responses and outcomes. Such situations have traditionally been the operationalizations of control and no control. These conditions were established by informing subjects either accurately or randomly about their performance on each of 32 moderately difficult analogies which were presented verbally. Success and failure feedback were manipulated by informing

subjects that they scored either in the 95th or in the 25th percentile on these analogies.

The major dependent variable was the subject's selection of either performance-facilitating or performance-inhibiting music to be listened to prior to an alleged retest. The selection of inhibiting music was considered to be the manifestation of a self-handicapping behavior. Measures of control as well as measures of expectancies and attributions about one's performance were used as ancillary dependent measures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Seventy-six male undergraduates volunteered to participate in a 60-minute study that purportedly was investigating the effects of music on intellectual and creative types of tests. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions and led to believe that they would be taking two parts of an intellectual-creativity test that would be separated by music.

Prior to the manipulations, subjects were given the Multidimensional Internal-External Scale (Gurin, Gurin, Lao and Beattie, 1969) and the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (Zuckerman and Lubin, 1965). These scales attempt to measure beliefs in control and mood respectively.

Subjects were then administered the manipulations of contingency or noncontingency and success or failure during the presentation of "Intelligence-Creativity Test I". This test consisted of 32 analogies in multiple-choice format, each analogy consisting of four possible choices. The test was administered orally to subjects and subjects were requested to give their answers in the same format. Subjects were provided with immediate feedback following each of the analogies. The type of feedback varied according to the contingency condition to which the subject had been assigned. Subjects

in the contingent conditions received accurate scores based on the total number of correct responses made on the analogies. Subjects in the non-contingent conditions received points for inaccurate answers given on 75% of the problems.

When the 32 analogies were completed, the points were tallied and the subject's score was announced. Subjects in the success conditions were informed that they scored in the 95th percentile while subjects in the failure conditions were told that they scored in the 25th percentile.

Subjects were then asked to complete the Midpoint Questionnaire which contained questions about perceptions of control, performance expectations and performance attributions with regard to Intelligence - Creativity Test I.

Bogus information about the transient effects of the musical selections on immediate intellectual-creative functioning was presented. Subjects were informed that according to "pilot studies", Tape 4 had been found to have facilitating effects on most intellectual - creative tasks performed shortly after listening to it, while Tape 9 had been found to have inhibiting effects. Summary statements and graphs from bogus pilot data were shown to subjects to increase the impact of the manipulation.

Subjects then chose one of the two tapes and indicated their choices on the Selection Form. Subjects who chose the inhibiting music of Tape 9 were considered to be manifesting a self-handicapping behavior. Subjects were asked to complete the Selection Form which consisted of questions about perceptions of control, performance expectations and performance attributions with regard to the hypothetical Intelligence - Creativity Test II.

Following the completion of the Selection Form, the experiment was terminated. Subjects never listened to music from the tapes nor were they

administered Intelligence-Creativity Test II. Subjects were completely debriefed when the experiment was completed.

RESULTS

Surprisingly, it was found that the best predictor of self-handicapping choices was reported feelings of depression, regardless of the experimental manipulations, $\chi^2(1)=9.67$, $p<.01$. These findings were obtained by conducting a logistic regression of the personality variable, depression, the experimental variables, feedback and contingency, and the criteria of self-handicapping choices. The data for self-handicappers were then compared with those of non-handicappers by collapsing the data for these subjects across experimental conditions. One-way analyses of variance were conducted. In addition to depression, self-handicappers reported more feelings of anxiety, $F(1,74)=5.21$, $p<05$, prior to the experimental manipulations compared with non-handicappers. There were no significant differences between self-handicappers and non-handicappers on the Multidimensional IE Scale. (Table 1).

As predicted, self-handicappers reported more feelings of control over the test than non-handicappers, $F(1,74)=4.68$, $p<05$; even though self-handicappers ascribed less importance to having control $F(1,74)=5.31$, $p<.05$ (Table 2). These findings substantiate predictions based on the hypothesis that self-handicapping may result from an illusion of control. There were no significant differences between self-handicappers and non-handicappers on performance expectations, and the only significant attribution finding was that self-handicappers treated luck as having less of an effect on their performance during the anticipated retest, $F(1,74)=5.02$, $p<.05$.

DISCUSSION

Self-handicapping choices were more likely to be made by subjects who reported greater feelings of depression. This was true regardless of the experimental conditions to which subjects had been assigned. These findings suggest that subjects' experiences with success or failure and feedback which was contingent or noncontingent have little to do with the adoption of self-handicapping strategies. Rather, self-handicapping behavior appears to occur among individuals with a predisposing cluster of personality characteristics.

It was proposed that a dysfunctional level of the illusion of control may be operating in the inferential processes of self-handicapping people. Theoretically, the illusion of control is rooted in the idea that a need for control exists within individuals (DeCharms, 1968; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Kelly, 1955; Lefcourt, 1973; Weiner, 1972; White, 1959). When uncertain or uncontrollable circumstances occur, beliefs in control become jeopardized. In fact, individuals with a strong need to control may actually alter their behaviors in uncontrollable situations before changing their beliefs about the actual degree of control. Therefore, the adoption of self-handicapping behaviors may be an attempt by individuals to maintain non-veridical beliefs in control.

Support for the major hypothesis of this study was obtained since subjects with higher perceptions of control were more likely to make self-handicapping choices. Likewise, self-handicappers ruled out the effects of chance on situational outcomes following their self-handicapping behavior.

Although self-handicappers were more likely to report greater feelings of control than non-handicappers, they simultaneously gave lower ratings to the importance of having control over most things that occur to them. Thus,

self-handicappers appear to maintain an illusory sense of control while paradoxically downplaying the importance of control. This finding suggests that either self-handicappers defensively deny the need for control or self-handicapping actions result from ambivalent feelings of control in various situations.

While the present study produced some interesting results, there are still aspects of self-handicapping which need to be explored. Future studies may be directed at examining other personality characteristics associated with self-handicapping behaviors as well as some practical implications of subjective judgments of control in relation to self-handicapping.

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Table 1.

Personality Measures of Self-handicappers and Non-handicappers[a]

Personality parameter	Self-handicappers	Non-handicappers	Maximum value
Depression	14.53	10.38**[b]	40
Anxiety	7.78	5.92*	21
Hostility	8.83	6.65*	28
Multidimensional IE Scale	11.39	10.07	
Internal			0
External			26

[a] Higher scores represent greater levels of the particular variable in question.

[b] *$p < .05$

**$p < .001$

Table 2.

Measures of Control by Self-handicappers and Non-handicappers[a]

Measure of Control	Self-handicappers	Non-handicappers
How much control did you feel you have over Test 1?	10.39	7.42*[b]
How important is it for you to have control over most things that occur to you?	14.97	16.88*

[a] A 21-point scale was used with higher numbers indicating greater levels of the particular variable in question.

[b] *$p < .05$